

The Project Marketplace: A Structured Method for Defining Passion Projects

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Abstract

Passion is key to unlocking student engagement. The Project Marketplace has been developed over the past five years in an MBA innovation course as a method for allowing students to pitch, vote and form groups around problems they are already passionate about. This allows them to apply course concepts and work on a topic they care deeply about and stronger engagement is a result. Student feedback is very positive about this method and it has now been adopted in several other courses. This method has also resulted in greater community connections for the students through their projects.

Introduction

Teachers the world over strive to have classes full of highly engaged students (Burch *et al.*, 2015; Haug *et al.*, 2019). However, academic engagement which can be defined as consisting of student vigour, dedication and absorption (Schaufeli *et al.*, 2002) can sometimes seem to be elusive concepts in practice. Passion, defined as “a strong inclination toward an activity that individuals like (or even love), that they find important, in which they invest time and energy” (Vallerand *et al.* 2007, p507), has been proposed as a key to unlocking academic engagement (Stoeber *et al.*, 2011).

In a business school context group based active learning methods, such as problem (Carriger, 2016; Savery, 2006), project (Blumenfeld *et al.*, 1991) or team based learning (Kitchens *et al.*, 2018) have become more common in an effort to increase engagement (Pearlstein, 2019). These methods have been suggested as a means of increasing student interest and engagement because students are involved in, “solving authentic problems, in working with others, and in building real solutions” (Blumenfeld *et al.*, 1991, p.373). However, research into student engagement and motivation has actually concluded mixed results through use of

these methods (Wijnia *et al.*, 2011). One possible reason for this, and the key challenge in using such methods, is the success in building student engagement and motivation is heavily dependent on the construction of the ill-structured problem or project topic itself (Savery, 2006). “Close attention, then, must be given to the design of project questions” (Blumenfeld *et al.*, 1991, p.374).

All these methods rely on teams and so various methods of forming student teams have been suggested which improve on various aspects when compared with simply allowing students to self-select or random group allocations (Chapman *et al.*, 2006). Mingling (Aller *et al.*, 2008), interviewing (Pearlstein, 2019), flocking (Harding, 2017), pairing friends then randomly allocating (Mahenthiran and Rouse, 2000) all have their advantages and limitations. Irrespective of the team formation method, “studies have shown shared interest and motivation to be the best predictors of team performance” (Aller *et al.*, 2008, p503). Which leads us to the question, how can we create highly engaged student project teams and enable them to work on problems they are collectively interested in or passionate about?

~~This~~ in this paper I will first briefly outline existing research on passion relevant to academic engagement and motivation. Then ~~it~~ I will describe in some detail the project marketplace, a structured method for defining team passion projects. This method has been developed and refined over the past five years in an MBA design thinking based innovation course as a means of answering the question above. ~~It~~ I will then describe the results from student feedback on this method and finish with conclusions including other benefits that have come from this method.

Background for Project

Student passion and motivation

Building on Self-Determination Theory (Deci and Ryan, 2000) which outlines that an individual's psychological growth comes from a need for autonomy, competence and relatedness, Vallerand and colleagues have constructed a dualistic model of passion (Vallerand *et al.*, 2007). This model suggests there are two distinct types of passion. Firstly there is harmonious passion, which comes from an autonomous internalisation of an activity to a person's identity. The activity becomes a significant aspect of their identity but is in harmony with other elements of their sense of self. People enjoy engaging with the activity in a flexible manner but do not feel compelled to take part in it, rather they freely choose to do so on a persistent basis. The second type of passion is obsessive passion. This mode comes from a deliberate controlled internalisation of the activity to one's identity. This may come from external pressure associated with the activity, such as social acceptance or internal pressure such as self-esteem. In this mode although people still enjoy the activity itself, they feel compelled to engage in it and this compulsion means they are not in control of the engagement. As a result the activity can come to occupy a larger portion of their identity than perhaps warranted which can conflict with other elements of their sense of self. Ultimately this conflict can lead to negative affect relating to the activity which was once enjoyable i.e. people develop a love-hate relationship to the activity.

Relevant to student's engagement, this distinction in types of passion is closely related to different types of motivation. The autonomous internalisation which can lead to harmonious passion comes from autonomous motivation which stem from intrinsic reasons for undertaking an activity (Sheldon and Elliot, 1999). The two key intrinsic reasons for undertaking something is that it is found to be enjoyable, and/or is in line with personal goals and values of the individual. "In general, if you are really interested in something you do not perceive your endeavors as work or learning but as fun!" (Löbner, 2006, p31). Intrinsic motivation can also be influenced through social interactions and of significance for group

projects highly motivated individuals can have a contagious effect on others in the group (Krishen, 2013). Conversely, the controlled internalisation which can lead to obsessive passion comes from controlled motivation, which stem from either external demands or self-evaluation such as anxiety or guilt.

From this understanding of types of passion and motivation there should be significant benefits from students being able to explore and expand on their harmonious passions in course contexts which would lead to higher autonomous motivation and engagement in their studies. This precise relationship has been empirically confirmed in a study comparing engagement and burnout in 105 university students (Stoeber *et al.*, 2011). But the question remains how best to enable students to do this without imposing demands that may lead to either disengagement or controlled motivation, which if in excess can lead to anxiety, obsessive passion and potentially burnout.

Procedures Followed

The project marketplace

In order to allow students to apply the skills, processes, techniques and mind-sets being introduced through a course to areas they are already harmoniously passionate about, the basic concept was to allow students to propose and self-select problem topics for their group projects. In previous years the topics were defined by the lecturer's interests, or by external organisations where there was an existing convenient relationship with the individual academic or business school, but these interests did not necessarily align with those of individual students. Alternatively the topics were left to students after they formed groups, which resulted in the typical issues such as social loafing, only working with their friends, along with extroverts dominating the topics. The project marketplace was therefore created as a means of democratising the group selection process, enabling a wider view of project topics

that were of interest to students along with creating groups with common interests. This method has been deployed and refined over the last five years in an executive MBA design thinking based innovation course at a triple crown (AACSB, AMBA, EQUIS) accredited business school in New Zealand. Student numbers in the class ranged from 16 up to 48 per year and this method is capable of being used in classes up to 50. ~~It is~~~~I would~~ recommend ~~that breaking~~ larger classes ~~be broken~~ into streams or sub-groups if numbers were greater than that. The class was run over 12 weeks with 10 x two hour weekly evening sessions along with a two day intensive block component. The project marketplace is the lead-in to the group project which typically starts approximately one third of the way through the course and will normally take up one complete two hour session, depending on numbers in the class. The group project which results from this method is associated with 40% weighting of the overall course assessment, consisting of a 25% project report and 15% presentation. Individual reflective journals are also completed alongside this work.

Pre-work

Several weeks before the project marketplace session the students are instructed to each start to consider a problem area that they are deeply interested in that they would like to work on for the group project. As an example this could be an issue they care about, a problem they or someone they know personally experiences, or an issue for a community group they might like to help. They are told that they will have to pitch their problem to the class, not with a solution in mind but purely to try and get other people interested in their problem area. The problem or interest area can be large or small and can come from any walk of life. This often creates some nervousness from students who are not used to this degree of autonomy and so several student questions typically follow either immediately or in the subsequent week. ~~The facilitator should~~ also describe the process that will be used at the project marketplace and highlight that there will be a collective voting process and only the problem areas that the

class collectively think are the most interesting will be selected to become the actual project topics. This helps create some social pressure and highlights the significance of reflecting on what the students actually care about. It also encourages them to think how might I best communicate this to the class? Describing it as a marketplace also introduces an element of competition which encourages students to prepare well for the session.

Problem pitching

On the day of the project marketplace every student comes prepared with a high level problem and pitches this to the entire class to try and get other people interested in this same area. The facilitator should encourage the students to focus on the problem, who it is a problem for, and why this matters. This provides the students with an opportunity to practice verbal presentation skills to build support for an idea with no powerpoint or similar allowed. The pitches are designed to be very concise, typically no more than 90 seconds although this timing is flexible depending on numbers and how much detail is required, and focus on the problem area, not what a solution might look like. In addition to practicing their own pitch skills the students have the opportunity to watch and listen to their classmates and so learn vicariously from the good presenters in the group. Because people are pitching about things they are passionate about the pitches are usually of a good quality. The enthusiasm of the students in the issues being discussed along with the knowledge that they will be able to vote and choose something they are interested in means that the whole class pays attention to all the presentations, rather than switching off after their own one is done, as is often the case in more traditional presentation sessions. Once they finish their pitch they place a post-it note with their name on the top and a brief description of their problem onto the wall in a designated area in the room. For an on-line class a similar effect can be created using padlet or similar on-line collaboration tools. In 2020 this session had to be conducted live through zoom with a padlet wall being used for the virtual post-its. It worked almost as well as an in

class session. ~~It was I found it~~ helpful however to have the padlets pre-populated with the class names and then call out the names for who was presenting next to avoid long delays waiting for volunteers to go next. ~~The facilitator I~~ summarised the problem area live on the padlet notes as the students pitched.

Voting

Once everyone in the class has pitched their problem and placed their post-it on the wall there is a voting phase. Every student is allowed three votes, which are placed by putting a tick in the corner of each post it note, or e.g. liking a padlet post when on-line, for ideas they think are worthy and they would like to work on. This encourages the students to critically analyse the topics presented and also self-reflect on things they are interested in or passionate about. The students take the voting seriously and the good quality/most interesting problems tend to rise to the top. ~~The facilitator should I do~~ tell the class that ~~they I~~ retain the power of veto for project selection in case of any non-suitable projects being selected but in the author's experience this I have has never actually been needed ~~had to use it~~. Gathering around the voting area creates a sense of excitement in the class as people take their turn at voting. Note it is not one at a time so there are normally several people re-reading the post-its to find or remind themselves of the topics they liked the sound of and as people complete their votes they will return to their seats.

Project topic selection

After the voting process has been completed the ideas with the most votes will be selected by myself as the topics for the group projects. To do this ~~the facilitator should I will~~ already know how many projects ~~we are~~ seeking needed based on the desired group size, which ~~is~~ nominally ~~aim for~~ four or five students per group, and so can start to pick out the topics with the highest votes and place these post-it notes in a separate area in a single line and work down until ~~we they~~ reach the right number of topics. In the event of a tie in number of votes

then ~~I~~the facilitator can make a judgement call or effectively vote for one which ~~they~~I think will make the best project topic. Also there is often some similar problems that can sometimes split the votes in a certain area so sometimes ~~these can be~~I may combined topics to help in the event of a tie. From this process then the top problems will have emerged and so ~~the facilitator~~I should~~will~~ then announce each one as the project topics for the class. Each topic will have its own post-it as proposed by a student in a new area on the wall.

Group formation

The students then self-organize into groups around the topics. Firstly though ~~I~~the facilitator can check with the students that proposed the topics that have been selected that they want to work on the topic they proposed for the group projects. This is because in some instances ~~the author has~~I have had students who were self-aware enough to recognise that what the issue needed was actually a completely fresh set of eyes on the problem. So while it was an issue important to them, they actually wanted someone else to work on it. In ~~my~~the author's experience this has been rare, but particularly for organisational problems, has yielded very good results. Once this question of the proposers working on the topics they proposed is resolved then the rest of the class are asked to move their original post-it, which still has their name clearly at the top, under one of the selected project topics they would like to work on. The facilitator should be~~I am~~ clear that ~~they~~I will have the final say in the group allocations and may have to move some people around to ensure diversity in the groups and even out the numbers. Because the students have had to vote for three ideas earlier they already have expressed some interest in more than one project and not just their own so they are generally OK with moving to their second or even third choice if need be. The facilitator should~~I will~~ normally do this in open conversation with the class while moving the post-its around so people who are very reluctant to move to an alternative topic can make their case or those that don't mind moving to another one ~~will~~can also say so. At the conclusion of the process

then there are a defined number of groups with nominally four or five students in each who are formed around areas that they are collectively interested in. The juggling of group makeup was the one area that did not work so well in an on-line environment. This was largely due to not being able to do it live and so was essentially a first come first served basis after the project topics were created.

Group identity

The final but very important step in this process is the students are then asked to physically get in their group, come up with a name for their group and create a sign for the group on a single sheet of paper. As groups complete this the facilitator can then take a photograph of them together holding their sign with their group name. When on-line this was achieved by the group proving ~~me with~~ a screenshot with their sign being displayed at a group zoom meeting. This means they immediately have a creative task together and gets them working on something as a team while also providing them with a sense of team identity. This also starts them getting to know their group mates and they can start to have discussions about their individual strengths and how they are going to work together. At this time they are encouraged to also discuss their group dynamics, individual backgrounds, working styles, group processes and so on.

Results, Findings and Validation

This has been a highly successful way to form self-motivated groups and to allow students to apply new concepts to significant issues that they care deeply about. As an example, in 2017 an MBA student pitched the idea of trying to improve financial literacy in low socio economic areas. This was voted for by many in the class as an interesting and important topic and was selected as one of the projects for that class. She and a group of classmates formed a group around this theme and then went on to conduct discovery research with local schools

and community groups. They then developed and tested a range of potential solutions in partnership with the schools. They have carried on the project well after the completion of the course. The instigator has now gone on to start a social enterprise based on this idea and has conducted financial literacy camps in association with one of the local schools, and continues to refine and develop the concept.

In 2020 for the MBA class who had experienced the project marketplace method, ~~I included~~ the following specific questions ~~were added to in~~ the anonymous student teaching survey after the course was completed. These results confirm the general feedback from previous years and indicates a high level of student support for this method along with alignment of the intended learning objectives for the course.

How interesting did you find the problem area for your group project? (n=41/44)		
I was deeply interested or passionate about the area	24	59%
I was somewhat interested in the area	16	39%
I was ambivalent about the area	1	2%
I was disinterested in the area	0	0%
I was resentful about the area	0	0%

How much effort did you put into the group project? (n=41/44)		
We put a lot more than usual into it	29	71%
We put a little more than usual into it	9	22%
We put about the same as usual into it	3	7%
We put a little less than usual into it	0	0%
We put a lot less than usual into it	0	0%

~~I also added a~~Another more open ended question was also added, “What were the advantages and disadvantages of the "project marketplace", i.e. everyone pitching a problem area and then voting on them, as a means of generating the topics and groups for the projects?” There were 35 responses to this from the 41 who completed the survey. The only disadvantage proposed by a small number of students was they had not realised the significance of the

pitch and so had not prepared for this as well as they might have. This highlights the importance of clear communication for the pre-work stage.

There were three main themes from the advantages identified by the students. Firstly was the democratic and open nature of the process that ensured everyone had good level of engagement in the process. As the students said:

- “Strong sense of involvement, i.e. everyone can participate in generating the topics and groups for the projects”
- “It gave the opportunity for all individual members to included and put forward ideas. It also provided the opportunity for the class community to decide what was most important to them as a whole”
- “It was an effective method for understanding what majority of the class was interested to work on and what issues are considered more crucial as compared to the others. I really liked that approach.”
- “Advantage was we all could bring our ideas on a table, so that we could have a chance to know what other students have in their minds.”
- “I liked that everyone had a chance to pitch a problem area and vote on them”
- “I liked the idea that the projects were proposed by students.”

The second advantage theme was to do with being able to demonstrate and choose areas the students were interested in or already passionate about. As the students said:

- “I think it worked well, I chose a topic around landfill waste, which I am passionate about”
- “I feel like students pitching ideas was a great way of getting buy in to a particular problem. Also, it was great to choose a project rather than a team. Teams formed through individual interests, I feel this added so much more to the learning and project idea outcomes”

- “We all got to see the emotion driving the problem”
- “I really enjoy this way of pitching and picking up the problem that interests me most”
- “It was a good idea as we got to select areas we were interested in”

The third advantage theme was the diversity of project ideas that come from the process. As the students said:

- “It was a good way to do it and let everyone express a good or unusual problem, considering everyone has a different perspective. It was a good way to spark creativity and giving everyone a fair go from the start.”
- “I liked the pitching of ideas and the diversity of thought”
- “At the pitching-a-problem stage, we can choose any problem in the market as we like with no limitation of our imagination and creativity”
- “Diverse range of ideas”

Conclusions

Student passion has been found to be a vital aspect in encouraging high levels of engagement.

The project marketplace as described in this paper has been a very successful method for creating highly engaged student teams who are self-motivated to work on issues they are passionate about.

The results of student feedback, quality of project work and considering a significant number of projects have been continued by students well beyond the official

course end dates are strong evidence of this. This method which has evolved over five years

is now a core part of the original course it was designed around, ~~but~~ and based on this

success ~~of the method~~ it has also now also been adopted by several colleagues in a number of

other courses, such as other postgraduate and undergraduate innovation and entrepreneurship classes. It is a method that can be deployed in many courses or majors, particularly where the learning objectives are related to a process and process based tools can be applied, such as in innovation, entrepreneurship and strategy, but may also have broader appeal.

In addition to the increased engagement of the individual students and student teams this method has also created greater connections and engagement between the university and the community. Typically where academics are defining the project topics, even if they are externally focussed, they have historically chosen organisations that either they personally have a connection to, or organisations that have established relationships with the university and business school. Because the project marketplace projects are not only student driven but the topics are student defined, this opens up connection with a much broader network of community based issues and groups that then become involved as a part of the project process. The author looks forward to the continued evolution of this method and encourages others to also experiment with it.

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